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Chair

Mr. Michael Levitt

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● (1305)

[*English*]

The Chair (Mr. Michael Levitt (York Centre, Lib.)): I call the meeting to order. Good afternoon, everyone.

I want to welcome everyone to the 114th meeting of the Subcommittee on International Human Rights.

Welcome to our guests. From the Ukrainian Canadian Congress we have Ihor Michalchyshyn and Orest Zakydalsky. Gentlemen, thank you very much for being here.

The warm relationship between Canada and Ukraine I know is of great importance to the members in this room. We're expecting a visit from the Canada-Ukraine Parliamentary Friendship Group next week, and there will be lots of activity on the Hill in a very multipartisan way, acknowledging and embracing the warm relationship between our countries.

I want to give you the opportunity to take 10 to 12 minutes to give us an update on some of the key issues. Again, with the visit coming next week, that'll be very valuable. Then, of course, we'll open it up to the members to ask you some questions, as is our practice.

With that, gentlemen, please proceed.

Mr. Ihor Michalchyshyn (Executive Director and Chief Executive Officer, Ukrainian Canadian Congress): Thank you very much. It's an honour for us to be here, and we are very grateful for the opportunity.

We represent the Ukrainian Canadian community in Canada in all of our branches and member organizations. We have six provincial councils, 19 local branches, and 29 national member organizations. We speak on Ukraine and issues of importance for the community here in Canada. The recent census tells us that there are around 1.4 million people in the Ukrainian-Canadian community in Canada.

As well, we work closely with our partners at the Ukrainian World Congress and other ethnocultural communities in Canada. We work with the Government of Canada through CUSAC, the Canada Ukraine Stakeholder Advisory Council, where we speak about Canada-Ukraine relations. Also, we regularly meet with members of Parliament, politicians, stakeholders, and other policy-makers.

You've invited us here today to talk about the human rights situation in Ukraine. As we know, Ukraine is a country at war. Since 2014, Russia has waged a war of aggression against Ukraine. Crimea and parts of the eastern Ukrainian oblasts—or regions—of Donetsk and Luhansk are under Russian occupation.

Russia's war has led to over 10,000 deaths, 24,000 wounded, and over 1.5 million internally displaced people. Far from being a frozen conflict, Russia's war against Ukraine is a hot war, in which Ukrainian soldiers and civilians die every day.

In the parts of sovereign Ukrainian territory occupied by Russia, the occupational authorities have instituted a regime that systematically, purposefully, and methodically violates internationally recognized human rights. It's these actions that we feel Russia wants to hide from the world as it hosts the FIFA World Cup starting in mid-June. Our organization, UCC, will be part of a global information campaign to highlight the deplorable human rights record of the Putin regime, and we call on all members of Parliament to ensure this message reaches as wide an audience as possible.

In Crimea, a regime of terror has been implemented against the indigenous Crimean Tatar population, ethnic Ukrainians, and anyone who opposes Russia's occupation. The severe restrictions on and violations of internationally recognized human rights that have been documented include restrictions on and violations of freedom of expression; the right to the equal protection of the law; the right to a fair trial; freedom of assembly and association; freedom from torture, cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment; and freedom from arbitrary arrest, detention, or exile.

In April 2016, the Russian authorities banned the Mejlis, the representative assembly of the Crimean Tatar people. Since the beginning of Russia's occupation, there has been a campaign against the Crimean Tatar people, ethnic Ukrainians, and other institutions of both groups, and they have been systematically targeted in an attempt to quash dissent in the peninsula.

Illegal arrests, detentions, searches, and intimidation are commonplace tactics in Crimea. Over 70 Ukrainian citizens are illegally imprisoned today, either in Crimea or in the Russian Federation, on falsified charges. Many have been handed long prison sentences for no crime other than opposing Russia's invasion and occupation.

These are people like Oleg Sentsov, a Ukrainian filmmaker from Crimea who opposed Russia's invasion, and Volodymyr Balukh, another who is in prison for his views. Both Balukh and Sentsov are part of a group of people on hunger strikes, as are several other Ukrainian prisoners, in opposition to their illegal imprisonment. Earlier this week, on June 4, Russia sentenced Ukrainian journalist Roman Sushchenko to 12 years in prison on fabricated espionage charges.

Russia has consistently ignored the international community's demand for the release of these Ukrainian political prisoners. As one of Ukraine's staunchest international allies, Canada has a unique opportunity to leverage the G7 presidency to support peace and security in Ukraine and to ensure that Ukrainian political prisoners jailed by Russia are released and returned home to their families. In our letter to the Prime Minister, public statements, and numerous meetings with Canadian officials, the Ukrainian Canadian Congress has called on the Government of Canada to ensure that ending Russia's aggression against Ukraine will be a priority of the G7 leaders' summit.

Since the adoption of the Magnitsky act in October of 2017, the Government of Canada has had the tools to sanction Russian officials responsible for these violations of internationally recognized human rights. The government has not taken any action thus far against the Russian judges, prosecutors, investigators, security service officials, and politicians responsible for these violations. Therefore, the Ukrainian Canadian Congress recommends that the government immediately use the tools available in the Magnitsky act to implement sanctions against Russian officials responsible for the violations of internationally recognized human rights of Ukrainian citizens.

I will now turn it over to my colleague Orest Zakydalsky.

Mr. Orest Zakydalsky (Senior Policy Advisor, Ukrainian Canadian Congress): Thank you.

A similar situation with respect to human rights exists in the Russian-occupied parts of the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts. Adding to the urgency and severity is the fact that Russia continues to wage a hot war that puts civilians directly at risk. Shelling of civilian targets by Russian and proxy forces is commonplace.

On May 28, a shell fired by Russian and proxy forces killed Daria Kazemirova, a 15-year-old girl in Zalizne. Several reports by human rights groups have documented irrefutable evidence of torture and ill treatment both of Ukrainian soldiers and of civilians held captive in the occupied territories. Cases have been documented of prisoners being killed or subjected to fake executions. Cases of sexual assault have also been documented, as has the recruiting of minors into illegal armed formations by Russian and proxy "authorities" in the occupied territories.

Recently, the joint investigation team into the downing of Flight MH17, in which all 298 passengers on board were killed, confirmed what the world has long known. Malaysia Airlines flight MH17 was shot down by a Russian Buk missile. These sophisticated weapons did not get to occupied Ukrainian territory on their own. Someone in the Russian chain of command gave the order to deploy the weapon. Someone even higher in the Russian chain of command gave that person the authority to issue such an order.

The Buk that brought down MH17 originates from the 53rd Anti-Aircraft Missile Brigade, a unit of the Russian army from Kursk. The downing of MH17 is an act of international terrorism to which the international community must respond with resolve. The UCC calls on the Government of Canada to work with allied nations to designate the Russian Federation a state sponsor of terrorism and to declare the so-called Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics terrorist organizations.

The egregious human rights violations perpetrated by the Russian occupation authorities in Crimea and the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts are a direct result of Russia's war against Ukraine. These violations will end only once Russia's war and the occupation of the Crimea and Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts ends.

In order to ensure peace returns to Europe, the international community must exert significantly more pressure on the Russian authorities and economy. If war is more expensive to the Kremlin than peace, Ukraine will have peace.

In April 2018, the U.S. Treasury imposed sanctions on seven Russian oligarchs and 12 companies they own or control, 17 senior Russian officials, a state-owned Russian weapons trading company, and a subsidiary Russian bank. The U.S imposed the sanctions in response to Russia's continuing international malign activity, including Russian's invasion of Ukraine and its support for the murderous Assad regime in Syria.

The Government of Canada has not imposed any sanctions on Russian officials, companies, or sectors of the Russian economy since November 28, 2016. The UCC recommends that in the nearest possible time the Government of Canada implement mirror sanctions against the Russian officials and companies designated on April 6 by the U.S. Treasury, and that the Government of Canada strengthen sectoral, economic, and individual sanctions on Russia and Russian officials, including the removal of Russia from the SWIFT international payment system.

Canada, in co-operation with the EU, the G7, and other like-minded nations, should strengthen economic sanctions on Russia in order to exert pressure on Russia to end its occupation of Crimea and its invasion of eastern Ukraine.

With that, thank you for allowing us the opportunity to testify today. We of course welcome any questions you may have.

● (1310)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We're going to begin.

MP Sweet and MP Anderson, I think you're splitting the time.

Mr. David Sweet (Flamborough—Glanbrook, CPC): Thank you very much for your testimony.

Can you share with this committee the nature of your conversations with the Government of Canada in regard to sanctions of members of Putin's regime who should be targeted? Have they made, or are you aware that they are making, a list of the most egregious perpetrators of human rights violations against the Tatars and ethnic Ukrainians? Have you supplied any names of and evidence on those people who should be targeted?

Mr. Ihor Michalchyshyn: Thank you for the question. I would say that we've had an ongoing dialogue with the Government of Canada for a number of years about the issue of sanctions, starting in 2014.

Obviously our organization works in Canada, but we work with partners in Ukraine. There are many civil society organizations that follow these kinds of cases in the Russian court system, and many partners who profile this, such as Amnesty International and others who follow the court cases. For many of these people, the situation is that although they are Ukrainian citizens, they have been arrested in Crimea and eastern Ukraine and are tried and jailed in the Russian domestic court and penal system. That's the crux of the issue.

We have supplied lists that we've received from organizations such as Let My People Go. We have copies of some of these lists here to share with members as well, from specific cases; every case has a process from the arrest to the prosecution. These lists include the judges, prosecutors, police officials, and, ultimately, prison authorities. There is an increasing volume of evidence of the kinds of people involved in the mechanics of detaining a Ukrainian political prisoner. We're happy to share those with the committee today.

We have supported the creation of a sanctions unit at the Department of Global Affairs, because we know that this has been an ever-evolving issue. We are hopeful that they are considering these kinds of further actions, but again—I think for a variety of reasons—they're not able to share with us the details of their work in terms of who specifically they're looking at. I think that's the kind of question that members of Parliament should be asking of the department. We look forward to hearing more about what they are able to do.

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Anderson.

● (1315)

Mr. David Anderson (Cypress Hills—Grasslands, CPC): Thank you.

I want to welcome both of you. I was in Ukraine last week. It was great to be at an event that was multi-party and had multi-department organs of the government there. It was a multi-leader event and prayer breakfast. As I've told you before, the atmosphere was tense, but really, I think it was a good atmosphere.

One of the things that was probably most poignant was that one of the young guys who was working with us called himself a refugee in his own country. He's from eastern Ukraine. I thought it was an interesting way to see that. He couldn't go home, and he has family on both sides of the line. He talked to us a bit about that.

I want to talk a bit about the increased tensions in the eastern area there. In the last couple of days, I think, Putin has said that there would be "drastic consequences for Ukraine's statehood" if it tries to liberate Donbass. Is that just more talk, or is there heightened aggression there since the election?

Mr. Orest Zakydalsky: There has been an increase in attacks, both on Ukrainian military positions on the front line and on civilian areas, with increased artillery and mortar shelling since about March 2018. The last two or three months have been a lot worse than, say, the previous six months. The cause of that is the subject of speculation, I think, in terms of what the Russian occupation force there is trying to gain by ratcheting up the pressure. That can be interpreted in a bunch of different ways, and I don't know that it's.... I think the point is that there has not been enough pressure put on Russia to stop and to pull its armies out of eastern Ukraine.

Ambassador Volker, the American special representative, has been meeting with his counterpart from the Russian side, Vladislav Surkov, who is a special representative of Putin's, since July 2017, so for basically a year, and we are where we were a year ago.

Mr. David Anderson: I'm going to run out of time here, so can you talk a bit about the new bridge, the Kerch Strait bridge, that has gone in, and what impact that has had? Crimea is one of the first places where Russia really showed that aggression. What does that do in solidifying that kind of situation we find in Crimea?

Mr. Orest Zakydalsky: Well, I think the Kerch bridge, along with a bunch of other actions the Russians have taken, is an attempt to make the occupation permanent. The Kerch bridge gives you a link for the delivery of whatever—freight and goods and that kind of thing. Like other actions, this is one of the things they're doing to try to solidify this occupation.

When they do something like that, I think it's incumbent that the rest of the world put more pressure on them. With respect to the Kerch bridge, we saw that everyone condemned it, but there wasn't any increase in any penalties on Russia for doing it. I think that's the main issue: the follow-through of actions.

● (1320)

Mr. David Anderson: Have the sanctions to this point been effective? You're asking for more. You're asking for Canada to move. Do you see the effectiveness of the ones implemented in the past?

Mr. Ihor Michalchyshyn: I would say that Canadian sanctions, combined with American and EU actions, are effective. We believe more coordinated action is needed. For example, the Magnitsky act that Canada passed has gone through many parliaments among Canada's allies—the U.K., the U.S., and other European parliaments. We believe it won't be just one country's action but a coordinated alliance, if you will, of countries that are dedicated to confronting the Russian aggression that will be the defining point in this conflict.

Mr. David Anderson: Do you think that's the most effective tool we have?

Mr. Ihor Michalchyshyn: We also believe there's supplying Ukraine with defensive weapons. In terms of the military aspect, this is a military act of aggression, so we are happy to see that our American allies and others are.... Canada, of course, through Operation Unifier, is training troops. The Americans have recently supplied specific defensive weapons to the Ukrainian armed forces.

That is another element of it, but the larger political element of the conflict remains. I think that's where the international alliance needs to be strong and unified in its approach on the sanctions issue.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll now move to MP Wrzesnewskyj.

Mr. Borys Wrzesnewskyj (Etobicoke Centre, Lib.): Thank you, Chair.

Just before I put questions to our witnesses, I'd like to table a document for the record of this hearing. It contains two lists. One is a list of 74 Ukrainians held illegally by Russia. These are individuals who were illegally arrested, who in most cases were abducted into Russia, and who have faced or will be facing show trials. The second list is of the jailers, torturers, and in many cases prosecutors and judges of show trials that have taken place.

I'd like to table this in English and French, for the record.

The Chair: Thank you, and thank you for having it in both official languages.

Go ahead, MP Anderson.

Mr. David Anderson: I'm not going to object to this, but we haven't heard or seen anything of this. If Borys wants to stop by and visit our committee, it would be appropriate for us to see the documents beforehand.

The Chair: Yes. It is the practice of this committee that we distribute things before we hand them out. In this case, if there's no objection from the floor, we'll allow it. If not, we'll hold it and pass it out to members.

Mr. Borys Wrzesnewskyj: I'm happy to hold the list until the end of the meeting. I do have some extra copies that I'm more than happy to share, as long as there are no objections.

The Chair: No, it's fine. It's a point of order, and a valid one, given our operating procedures that we tend to guard here.

That said, you're free to pass those out. Thank you again.

Mr. Borys Wrzesnewskyj: Thank you. I appreciate the co-operation.

To our witnesses, I'd like to put questions first on the situation in Crimea and then on the situation in occupied Donbass.

Crimean Tatars have had a tragic history ever since Imperial Russia first invaded Crimea two centuries ago, with a series of ethnic cleansings and an attempted genocide in 1944 by Stalin. What's particularly troubling the closure of Crimean Tatar language schools; the closure of mosques; FSB officers watching the mosques continuously; the removal of all the Crimean Tatar leadership; the banning of their organizations; the disappearances of many of the key leaders, some never found, and others found with clear signs of torture; and recently the historic sites of the Crimean Tatars being closed for renovations and people witnessing very important cultural sites being disassembled and artifacts disappearing.

Would you call these the beginning of an attempt at ethnocide of the Crimean Tatar population?

● (1325)

Mr. Ihor Michalchyshyn: I think you've outlined the many deliberate actions being taken, and nothing here is being done by accident or is circumstantial. It's methodical, it's planned, and it's supported by the authorities there.

I think two groups are being targeted in Crimea—first, as you outlined, the Crimean Tatars and their specific territorial, historic, cultural, linguistic, and religious identity that relates to that geographical territory. We had a ceremony in Toronto two weeks ago when the Crimean Tatars' recently released prisoners and leadership came to Canada to raise the Crimean Tatar flag in Toronto and speak to Canadians about the importance of how Crimean Tatars see themselves as part of a multi-ethnic Ukrainian state. They are appealing for international support. I think they have great support in Ukraine for their cause.

The second group that's being targeted is Ukrainian citizens, other Ukrainian citizens whom we have met with, who may not be Crimean Tatars themselves. For religious reasons their churches, their places of worship, the language of instruction in their schools, their access to services are all being severely limited as they're being forced into taking out Russian citizenship.

We see a broad-based attempt to intimidate and to desecrate, as we indicated. I think it's specifically targeting the Crimean Tatar population, but also all Ukrainians who reside in Crimea.

Mr. Borys Wrzesnewskyj: I'll come back to my question, which was whether you would classify this as the beginnings of an ethnocide. Let me provide some additional context.

As well, perhaps just to your point on the persecution of ethnic minorities and the closure of religious institutions, I'd also like to note that the Jewish Crimean community no longer exists. Their synagogues were among the first religious places of worship that were shut down.

To come back to the Crimean Tatars, a century ago they were still a majority of the population, notwithstanding all the massive ethnic cleansing during the Russian Czarist occupation. Currently they're down to about 200,000 people. There has been an exodus. Their language is being suppressed, their historical cultural sites are being destroyed, and approximately a million Russian citizens have been moved into Crimea.

Is this an attempt to extinguish the only indigenous peoples of Crimea, namely the Crimean Tatars?

Mr. Ihor Michalchyshyn: I think as you've outlined, absolutely; they are being targeted systematically, and all the components of their identity and their history are being targeted in an attempt to change the demographics, the history of the peninsula, and the political environment to the very core.

I think the interesting part of the Crimean situation is what we know through online reports and international human rights monitoring. It's very clear every day, as you said, that the list grows. It's over 70 right now, and we've provided a briefing note for the committee that has the pictures and the faces. Because there are so many political prisoners, part of what we want to ensure is that these individuals have names and faces. Some of them are arrested for waving flags, some for taking pictures, and these are very—

Mr. Borys Wrzesnewskyj: Thank you.

Just because—

The Chair: Borys, no, that is going to be it. We're running a little over.

Now we're going to go to MP Hardcastle, please.

Ms. Cheryl Hardcastle (Windsor—Tecumseh, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, gentlemen, for your testimony today.

Help us understand a little more about Canada's response and what you envision it should be.

Have the existing sanctions furthered resolution at all, in your opinion?

● (1330)

Mr. Orest Zakydalsky: The effect of the existing sanctions from Canada, the United States, and the European Union, which were coordinated when this war started, has been to stop the Russian aggression from being worse than it is now. That's in the sense that these are things Russia has done, and we've put on sanctions to signal to Russia that the world is paying attention, finds this unacceptable, and will take measures to counter it.

What the sanctions haven't done, unfortunately—and part of the reason why we think they should be strengthened—is to get the Russians to change their policy. They've got them to not go as far as they perhaps would have, had there been absolutely no reaction.

I think Canada and certainly the rest of the international community wants the Russian army out of Crimea and the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts. To achieve that, I think a lot more pressure has to be put on the Russian government.

Ms. Cheryl Hardcastle: What kind of diplomatic engagement do you think would be useful?

Mr. Ihor Michalchyshyn: We believe Canada should continue to coordinate with our European and American allies to identify every possibility for diplomatic discussions, whether it's specifically the situation of the political prisoners....

We believe sanctions are part of the broader cause and effect that Russian officials need to have, that there's no more impunity in travel and business dealings. That model goes not only for the official but for their family members and their children, meaning that if you participate in this kind of behaviour, you can't send your children abroad and you can't holiday abroad. You are no longer welcome, because you have transgressed those international norms.

I think Canada has a valuable role to play with our western allies, with our G7 allies, at that partners' table. I think Canada is doing a great job on Operation Unifier through military training and assistance, and I think will continue to speak with the Ukrainian military and other allies about what other assistance Ukraine requires in the hard conflict that is not going to be resolved by diplomacy.

There is a contact line, and there is shelling that goes on, and Ukraine and other partners are there on the ground facing a military conflict as well. As much as we talk about the sanctions, there is—as other MPs have mentioned—that hard military aspect of containing the conflict, so to speak, so it does not go further into Ukraine.

Ms. Cheryl Hardcastle: Do I have another minute?

The Chair: You certainly do.

Ms. Cheryl Hardcastle: You don't think at this point that there's any use for any diplomatic engagement? Right now, should we be focused on individual sanctions?

Are there any groups or organizations that trade e-commerce somewhere? You must know areas of relationships. At some point, for there to be a resolution, there is going to have to be some kind of peace-building exercise, even if that's long term. I just want a clearer picture. Do you think there are some cursory attempts right now with a group or two that you can see would be worthy of some kind of diplomatic exercise, or is it just "no", we're not at that point now with these actors?

Mr. Orest Zakydalsky: There have been diplomatic talks for four years, and they haven't gotten anywhere. The OSCE has what's called the trilateral contact group, which includes Russia, Ukraine, and the OSCE. There is also what are called the Normandy talks, which is Germany, France, Ukraine, and Russia.

The OSCE process produced the Minsk accords. The first point of the Minsk accords is a ceasefire, which was signed three years ago, and I don't think there have been more than a dozen days in three years when there has been no fighting.

These diplomatic efforts have to be undertaken from a position of strength by the west, and the way to get to that is to increase pressure on the Russians in order to force them to make a deal. It is pretty obvious that right now they're not feeling enough pressure to make a deal, because it's been four years of fighting. Diplomacy that isn't backed up with credible strength is ineffective, as we can see from these past four years.

● (1335)

Ms. Cheryl Hardcastle: Do you see that it would be a useful to approach this by breaking it off into separate issues, whether it's Crimea or minorities like the Tatar political prisoners in the Ukraine, or do you think it's best to approach it as one big picture, since it's evolving as different issues are splintering off? How are you getting your heads around it now?

Mr. Ihor Michalchyshyn: As you identified, there are many smaller pieces of the conflict, but there is also the big conflict. Four years ago, there may not have been 70 political prisoners, because the situation was different. Four years ago, Ukraine was dealing with the immediate invasion and annexation issues, so there weren't long-term human rights observations being made and the military was in a very different state of affairs.

Through our intervention with Operation Unifier and through our role in leadership in Ukraine with international development, there is every opportunity for Canada to play a leadership role, especially in this G7 year. We believe Canada has a great opportunity to bring our other allies along, as we said, further to the increasing of consequences and risks for Russia's behaviour. As we said, if Canada alone increases its sanctions without the allies, it's not significantly meaningful, and if our allies do it without Canada, it's also not significantly meaningful. There has to be a really strong coherence of reactive behaviour.

The Chair: I'm going to ask you to cut off the answer there, just so we can move on to the next member.

We're going to go to MP Khalid, please.

Ms. Iqra Khalid (Mississauga—Erin Mills, Lib.): Thank you, Chair. Thank you as well to the witnesses for your very compelling testimony.

Chair, I'm going to be splitting my time with Mr. Wrzesnewskyj.

I do have one specific question. We talk about sanctions a lot in this subcommittee, as they have impacts on the ground. When hundreds of thousands of people are facing food insecurity in conflict areas, what is the impact of these sanctions on those people? Is there a negative or positive impact?

Second, women and children, and women especially, often become the first targets in any conflict, as we've seen in this subcommittee. What has been the impact on women on the ground? What role can Canada play, given our very feminist international development policy? We talk about the political solutions for the long term, but what specifically can Canada do in the short term to help the hundreds of thousands of people on the ground right now with respect to humanitarian aid?

Mr. Ihor Michalchyshyn: I can tell you that Canada plays a leading role in Ukraine in terms of supporting immediate services for internally displaced people, or IDPs, to provide them with the essentials of housing, food, and shelter. We're very pleased to see that. Unfortunately, these internally displaced people don't know how long they're going to be internally displaced. That's where we've seen the increased need for services in terms of employment, education, and resettlement. There still is very much hope that there is a resolution to this conflict, that these people can go back to their traditional homes and lives.

The sanctions we are talking about and recommending are ones that would be imposed on the people who participate in the torture, imprisonment, and, we feel, illegal judicial processes that the Russian state is proceeding with in terms of the activists.

As you've noted, the families of the 70 who have been jailed are at risk. They're seen as liabilities and security threats to the Russian state. They are fleeing and they are not able to continue their lives. We feel the consequences of imposing stronger sanctions on Russian officials and their families will be the lack of impunity: they and their children will no longer be able to travel freely and enjoy the lifestyle that they may have been accustomed to.

We feel that's a strong signal from Canada and our allies as to the way in which international rules-based order should be proceeding. We've been very happy to see that Ukraine internally has spent a lot of time, with the backing of Canada and western allies, dealing with the influx of internally displaced people, primarily women and children. They've been struggling to figure out how to provide services, but with our support they have been doing a better job. It's going on four and five years, so this is becoming institutionalized. That's part of the issue—that it's becoming institutionalized and that there is no end in sight. That's why we feel that making this a norm is not the best option in this moment.

● (1340)

Mr. Borys Wrzesnewskyj: Thank you, Iqra.

Flight MH17 was touched upon. Everyone is aware that the vast majority of those civilian passengers were Dutch and Australian, but I'd just like to note that there was a Canadian. I'm asking for a quick yes or no on this. Holland and Australia have begun international legal proceedings. Given that a Canadian perished, do you believe Canada should join in those proceedings?

Mr. Orest Zakydalsky: Yes.

Mr. Ihor Michalchyshyn: Absolutely.

Mr. Borys Wrzesnewskyj: Thank you.

The Kerch bridge was mentioned in the context of creating a land connection from the Russian mainland to the Crimean peninsula. An important point is that we have to consider sanctions of different sorts. There are Magnitsky sanctions, but also sanctions that target companies—the companies that were involved in the engineering and the construction—and many of these companies are closely associated with Putin himself. Perhaps that's something that should be considered.

There is another aspect to it. Everyone sees the land bridge, but would you not agree that Russia, through the construction of this bridge, has also territorially expanded? It's not on land, though; it's the Sea of Azov. As the bridge was completed, they moved five of their biggest Caspian warships through the Volga-Don lock system into the Sea of Azov. They have a limited coastline in the Sea of Azov, but in fact they have taken territorial control of the Sea of Azov at this point in time. It is a territorial expansion once again that Russia is engaged in.

Would you agree with that premise?

Mr. Orest Zakydalsky: I would say that is absolutely true. I would also add that the bridge was constructed with the side benefit to Russia of interfering in Ukrainian commerce. The height of the bridge is something like 30 metres, which stops Ukrainian freight from reaching Mariupol, which is a big port. You can't send big ships under it. That wasn't done by accident either.

● (1345)

Mr. Borys Wrzesnewskyj: Thank you. That's also a very important point.

The Chair: Sorry, Mr. Wrzesnewskyj. We're over time. We're going to move to MP Sweet.

Mr. David Sweet: Thank you, Chair.

I have two quick questions, and my colleague will take over whatever time is left.

Let's put it straight. This bridge is really to fortify the supply lines of the Russian military. There's no pedestrian traffic or anything there, so this is strictly a military-purposed bridge.

I asked you originally about targeting sanctions, particularly with the Magnitsky law, which is adequate to basically do what we need to do. I want to verify what you said. Although you've supplied information and had the conversations, you have had no feedback from the Prime Minister's office or Global Affairs in regard to any willingness to take any action up to date. Is that correct?

Mr. Ihor Michalchyshyn: I would say they are well aware of our concerns. The way they research and prepare sanctions doesn't necessarily allow them to share that information with us, but since the day we mentioned, we have not seen new sanctions implemented. We certainly have done everything we can to supply resources in terms of information and actions, as our allies have done, but we are a bit frustrated that we're not seeing Canada keep up with our allies in this sphere.

Mr. David Sweet: You mentioned global partners in regard to sanctions. Who particularly would we need to have in order to make the next wave of sanctions really produce behaviour change?

Mr. Orest Zakydalsky: The biggest player in the room is the Americans. The second-biggest is the European Union. Everyone saw the significant effects of the sanctions that came into force in April, and those were only American, right? Europe did not match those either. The European Union acting by itself can also move things, but Europe is 28 countries, which makes it a lot harder to gain consensus there than with the Americans. Japan, obviously, is also an important player, but essentially those two are the biggest entities.

Mr. David Sweet: Thank you.

I will turn it over to my colleague now.

Mr. David Anderson: The religious entities I would say have been both used and have used this situation to advantage. Can you talk a bit about that? In February 2018 in Luhansk they passed a law that there must be no new religious entities unless they are tied to the traditional ones. The Russian Orthodox Church has been part of this whole conflict.

Can you talk a little about that and also about some of the pressures that are faced by groups such as the Jehovah's Witnesses and the Crimean Tatars in terms of their religious faith?

Mr. Ihor Michalchyshyn: I'm happy to speak about the religious faith angle of it. We had a visit to Ottawa about two months ago by one of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church authorities. The process their churches and other institutions in Crimea have had to undergo is to basically rename themselves and re-register with the authorities. They were not allowed to use the same names or many of the terminologies they would be associated with in other countries. I'm speaking very carefully, because it's a very particular security situation for those folks as well.

Mr. David Anderson: Are they being required to link to the Russian Orthodox Church?

Mr. Ihor Michalchyshyn: No, but they are required to re-register as a new organization, as a new entity. I was told there are surveillance cameras, both audio and visual, that are being placed in multi-faith...in mosques, in Roman Catholic and Ukrainian Catholic and you-name-it kinds of churches in Crimea, to monitor both who is leading the service and what is being said. We believe it leads to the dominance of the Russian Orthodox Church as they clamp down by imposing things like work visas and citizenship requirements for those work visas. It essentially becomes impossible for these other faith groups to operate in a legal way, because the bureaucratic structure being pushed down at them basically makes it impossible to exist.

● (1350)

Mr. David Anderson: I think I'm running out of time, but I'd like you to talk a little about what life on the line is like. It's not a traditional war and traditional front. The line seems to be moving back and forth. Civilians are living on both sides of it.

Mr. Orest Zakydalsky: Civilians on the Ukrainian side of the line never know when an artillery shell is going to be fired. The Russians and Russian proxy side place heavy weapons in cities. They put an artillery piece in a city. Ukraine is not going to fire into civilian areas, but the Russian side does. It is a pretty terrible situation for civilians. A lot have left. Some can't; some have elderly parents or circumstances that don't let them leave. If not every day, certainly a couple of times a week there are civilian casualties on the Ukrainian side.

There has not been significant movement or changes in the geography of the front for about four years now, so that line is heavily fortified. There are trenches and all the other typical things you see in a land war of the 20th century. It's an awful situation for civilians in the occupied territories because you have—

The Chair: Mr. Zakydalsky, I'm going to ask you to cut it off there. We're running out of time, and I want to give all members a chance.

Mr. Fragiskatos, go ahead, please.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos (London North Centre, Lib.): I'll share my time with Mr. Whalen.

Thank you for appearing here today. You always provide great testimony. I know that's true of this committee and of the foreign affairs committee as well.

I want to ask about democracy and civil society to understand the nature of civil society approaches in Ukraine a little more.

Supporting democracy is a very important component of the bilateral relationship Canada has with Ukraine. Where is the focus of civil society organizations in Ukraine? Where is this issue of Russia? Where does it rank in its importance? Is it a situation of civil society organizations rallying together and making this their fundamental issue of concern, or is their focus more fragmented and focused on other things?

Mr. Ihor Michalchyshyn: The MPs from Ukraine whom you'll meet next week represent a rich and wide group of civil society in Ukraine, but they have come together, especially in recent months, as the situation of the political prisoners becomes more dire and as the hunger strikes escalate. We are seeing that everyone is concerned and bringing forward their actions and their expertise into the social media real world, campaigning to free these people and to highlight this situation.

As you know, a very broad civil society works on everything from environment to democracy-building, but I think the conflict with Russia and the aggression, torture, detainment, and human rights violations have predominated and will continue to predominate the activity of these groups.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: You mentioned environmental groups as an example. It's almost as if they're starting to focus on Russia.

● (1355)

Mr. Ihor Michalchyshyn: I think it's very difficult to be an activist in Ukraine and not recognize that the immediate existential threat to the country exists, and it's very difficult to undertake other reforms and other actions without fundamentally addressing the basic situation that is clearly in front of everyone.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: That helps for our understanding.

I'll turn it over to Mr. Whalen.

Mr. Nick Whalen (St. John's East, Lib.): In terms of human rights in the area, I'm wondering if you have any knowledge of what access Ukrainian native language speakers would have to medical and education services in the occupied areas of the Donbass, and what access to education services native Russian speakers would have on the Ukrainian side of the Minsk boundaries.

Mr. Orest Zakydalsky: I don't think there's a Ukrainian language school left open in Crimea. If there is, it would be one or two. Basically, in the occupied territories in the east, there is also a policy of essentially forceful implementation of the Russian language. That area on the Ukrainian side is also a predominantly Russian-speaking area, but that's not to say that people don't speak Ukrainian there. I wouldn't say that it's safe to be a Ukrainian speaker in the occupied territories.

That is not true in government-controlled Ukraine. There are a dozen MPs who are going to be here. I'm sure that for some of them, their first language is Russian. If you watch any news footage of the Ukrainian soldiers, you'll see that a significant proportion of the Ukrainian military is Russian-speaking.

On one side you have the Ukrainian government taking a civic view of citizenship, of language rights, and of all these other things. On the other side is a targeted policy of the imposition of the Russian language and Russian culture and so forth.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

MP Hardcastle is next.

Ms. Cheryl Hardcastle: Thanks.

To wrap up, gentlemen, if we're going to have an international community with Canada included that has a cohesive response, how do you see Canada playing a role in keeping this on the international agenda?

I'll leave you with that. That was a nice pitch.

Mr. Ihor Michalchyshyn: I'll do a very quick response. We think the best opportunity, obviously, is the G7 presidency, which Canada has this year. We know Canada has always has a strong international reputation, both in Ukraine and internationally, with many allies, both in NATO and in other strategic organizations such as the UN and so on.

We believe, now more than ever, that this kind of leadership is necessary. We believe that the willingness of our allies is there to take joint action. We believe that the situation is unfortunately deteriorating in terms of the human rights situation on the ground, both for individual political prisoners and for the situation in the conflict zones. The time for action is now, and we believe that Canada has the will and the resources to take that kind of leadership role. We're looking for the support of all parties to help encourage the Canadian government to take those steps.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

I want to thank you both for being here. I think we had a full and active engagement on this issue with you today. Again I recognize the visit next week of the Canada-Ukraine Parliamentary Friendship Group.

With it being two o'clock, we will adjourn. Have a good weekend, everyone.

The meeting is adjourned.

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